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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 003546

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: PREL PTER KU I2 IR

SUBJECT: SHIITE LEADER SAYS GOK FEARS ISLAMISTS, URGES U.S.
TO APPROACH IRAN

Classified By: DCM Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: In a recent meeting with Poloff, Shiite religious cleric Sayed Mohammed Bakr al-Mohri, an outspoken advocate for Kuwait's Shia population and a vocal critic of the GOK, lamented that although Kuwait's Shia had recently made great gains, the GOK was "fearful" of conservative Sunni elements. Accordingly, the GOK is loath to allow significant reform. Al-Mohri also shared his thoughts on the situation in Iraq, and suggested the USG actively engage Iran in an effort to stabilize Iraq. End Summary.

Gulf States Placation of Sunni Conservatives Dangerous

¶12. (C) The head of Kuwait's Shiite Clerics Association, Sayed Mohammed Bakr al-Mohri, told Poloff that he was disappointed with the rebuke he received from Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah during the latter's much-publicized meeting with newspaper editors on September 22, following al-Mohri's demands that the GOK allow the teaching of the Shiite (Jaafari) system of jurisprudence in Kuwait's schools and universities. Noting his surprise at the admonition, in which Shaykh Sabah criticized him for making "sectarian" statements, al-Mohri said the GOK's public criticism of him reflects the fact that the government is "fearful of Salafi Islamists." He said this was just one example of the many ways in which the GOK was placating Sunni conservative elements in society and subsequently crippling its own reformist agenda. Another example of this, he said, was Kuwait's tolerance for a website belonging to firebrand, anti-U.S. cleric Hamad al-Ali, which he claimed taught people to make bombs. (Note: Although Shaykh Sabah stated he would summon al-Mohri to discuss his demands, the Prime Minister has yet to do so, which suggests his remarks were only for public consumption. End Note.)

¶13. (C) Al-Mohri linked these examples to a larger, "dangerous trend" in which Gulf Arab Sunnis were increasingly falling under the sway of mainstream clerics who advocated violence against nonbelievers, and had even gone so far as to condone the killing of U.S. civilians in Iraq. Al-Mohri said extremists were still actively raising funds from Gulf States for terrorist activities, although the U.S. orchestrated crackdown on religious charities had reduced the amount of aid extremists could funnel to terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda. Al-Mohri heaped particular scorn on Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yousef al-Qaradawi, whom he said has a large following and routinely "calls for terrorism." He said four Kuwaiti jihadis who had been returned to Kuwait from Syria after attempting to cross into Iraq to fight Americans had been influenced by al-Qaradawi's fatwas.

Shia Making Gains in Kuwait: Motivated By U.S. Attention

¶14. (C) Al-Mohri said the Shia population in Kuwait had achieved much over the past few years and he is optimistic that they will continue to do so. Praising the State Department's Human Rights Report, al-Mohri said knowing that the United States is taking note of the plight of Kuwaiti Shia had encouraged him to continue pushing for reforms, even though the Shia had already made significant gains during the year. (Note: Shia celebrated Ashoura with a public reenactment of the battle of Karbala for the first time this year. In addition, the year saw the establishment of a Shiite Waqf (endowment) and the approval of numerous long-standing building permit applications for Shiite mosques and Husseiniyas. End Note.)

¶15. (C) Responding to Poloff's query, al-Mohri said that Yaser al-Habib, a Shiite who had been accused of 'sedition' for remarks he made on a widely distributed cassette tape, had fled the country after being erroneously pardoned in late ¶2003.

Iraq Shiites Appreciate U.S. Liberation

¶16. (C) Al-Mohri said the majority of Iraqi Shiites still follow the teachings of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose moderate views have been instrumental in limiting bloodshed there. He pointed out that Sistani had issued a fatwa

prohibiting the bearing of arms against coalition forces. Al-Mohri also said that Iraq's Shia population is still grateful to the U.S. for having liberated it from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.

Iranian Leaders Seek Stability in Iraq and View U.S. as Key

17. (C) Al-Mohri said he meets with the "highest religious authorities" whenever he visits Iran, up to and including President Khatami. He said all of these officials stressed that regional stability was a priority, particularly in Iraq, where a stable regime would facilitate cross border pilgrimages to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. That said, the situation in Iraq was unlikely to stabilize without the political backing of the U.S., Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Al-Mohri said he had heard that U.S. officials had approached Iran seeking Iranian support for stabilization efforts in Iraq. He urged the U.S. to continue these back channel approaches. Although he conceded that Iran feels threatened by the U.S. presence in Iraq, especially in light of ongoing IAEA investigations into Iranian nuclear activities, al-Mohri said that even Iran's most conservative leaders are not as hardline as they once were, and they are willing to engage in dialogue. (Note: Al-Mohri's comments do not coincide with open source and other reporting indicating that Iran is sparing no effort to keep Iraq destabilized. End Note.)

18. Comment: While al-Mohri may have some legitimate insights into the thoughts of the Hawza in Iraq and the public views of leaders in Iran, his claim that he is the voice of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Kuwait is belied by the persistency with which it is made. Al-Mohri, in his capacity as self-appointed mouthpiece for the Shiite community in Kuwait, will nonetheless continue to push the GOK, slowly forcing it to cede ground on rights previously denied Kuwait's Shiite minority. End Comment.

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